

## A. Introduction

### 1. Background

Massachusetts local boards of health (LBOH) are charged with **protecting the health of their communities**. In the event of a public health emergency, LBOH are responsible for **coordinating with appropriate partners** to manage the crisis and communicate to the public about the event.

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH) is a key partner with LBOH in handling and communicating about public health emergencies. MDPH, working with Policy Studies Inc. (PSI), has developed this Risk Communication Plan Template for LBOH as part of MDPH's ongoing efforts to increase statewide capacity to respond to and communicate about public health emergencies. Other components of this effort include:

- Developing MDPH's Risk Communication Plan;
- Conducting and reporting on a needs assessment of LBOH to respond to and communicate about public health emergencies;
- Developing a risk communication plan for MDPH to communicate with special populations in the state; and
- Conducting risk communication training for LBOH, MDPH Managers, and other public health partners.

### 2. Template Development

**Local boards of health play a key role** in responding to and communicating about public health emergencies in the Commonwealth. While many boards of health have operational protocols in place for communication about a public health emergency, many have **not fully documented the process**. As part of its work researching and developing a Risk Communication Plan for MDPH, PSI was hired to develop a Risk Communication Plan Template for local boards of health.

**This Template is closely based on the core components of the MDPH Risk Communication Plan.** To develop the MDPH Risk Communication Plan, PSI collected and reviewed relevant documents and resources, and conducted in-depth interviews with both internal and external stakeholders in risk communication in the Commonwealth. Key sources include:

- Association of State and Territorial Directors of Health (ASTDH), *Model Emergency Response Communications Planning for Infectious Disease Outbreaks and Bioterrorist Events*
- CDC, *Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication*
- CDCynergy: Your Guide to Effective Health Communication
- Covello, Vincent, "Communication in Risk Situations: Responding to the Communication Challenges Posed by Bioterrorism and Emerging Infectious Diseases," *Risk Communication Workbook*

PSI also conducted in-depth interviews with numerous managers within MDPH, LBOH staff, as well as MEMA and other state and local agencies.

In addition, PSI gathered information about reaching a number of populations throughout the state who may not receive information distributed via dominant media channels (e.g., television, radio, print) or in the state's most commonly spoken language (English). To pursue this information, PSI conducted in-depth interviews with community leaders and service providers with expertise in serving the targeted groups to determine where these populations reside, their communication needs, and the best ways to reach them.

### 3. Purposes of This Template

This Template is intended to inform your agency's risk communication process during and after a public health emergency. Increased physical and psychological stresses experienced during an emergency affect the public's decision-making framework and perception of risk. The public must feel empowered to take action in the event of a crisis to reduce the likelihood of victimization and fear<sup>1</sup>, and to facilitate your agency's response to the crisis.

**A strong risk communication plan offers your agency an effective “dual-use” approach to other public health problems.** In the event of a naturally occurring infectious disease emergency, such as West Nile virus or a foodborne illness outbreak, your agency can use the same procedures to alert and involve the media and the public. Relationships developed with community groups can be used to improve communication with special populations concerning a wide variety of public health issues, including vaccinations, access to health care, and disease prevention.

Thus, the considerable investment of time and resources in the planning process should be recognized as an important investment in building relationships and an infrastructure that will support public health communications and programs generally, not just during an emergency.

#### **The Purposes of this Template are to:**

- Serve as a single resource on risk communication about public health emergencies in your community.
- Define roles and responsibilities for risk communication in relation to partners at the local, state and federal levels.
- Document current risk communication processes and protocols at your agency, including redundant systems of communication.
- Document clear pathways for reaching special populations in the event of a public health emergency.
- Identify and address areas for further development in risk communication practice.

<sup>1</sup> CDC *Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication*, September 2002  
Local Board of Health Risk Communication Plan Template

#### 4. How to Use This Template

This document provides a framework and recommendations for your agency's risk communication plan. It is based on principles from the most up-to-date information available on risk communication in the Commonwealth and nationally. This document's content and format are closely based on the MDPH Risk Communication Plan.

There are 3 major sections in this document:

1. *Risk Communication in Public Health*: Key principles and definition of risk communication in public health.
2. *Overview of Risk Communication in the Commonwealth*: An overview of roles and responsibilities related to risk communication at the local, state and federal levels for different kinds of emergencies.
3. *Risk Communication Plan Template*: Recommendations and templates for collecting and documenting information related to seven core areas of your risk communication plan. In addition to information about each core area of risk communication, worksheets and templates are provided for your use. As you use the templates and recommendations to document information throughout this section, you will be building and writing your agency's risk communication plan.

**For agencies that have already developed and documented their risk communication plans,** this template may be useful as a guide to best practices in risk communication, and to identify any areas in the agency's plan that need further attention or development.

**For agencies that have not fully developed or documented their risk communication plans,** it is recommended that your agency assemble an internal working group to address each component of this template. Consider scheduling regular meetings with the working group to make systematic progress in each area.

To make the most of limited time and resources, your Regional Coalition may be an appropriate partner in the development of your risk communication plan.

#### 5. Ongoing Maintenance to the Plan

Risk communication is an *ongoing process* of increasing organizational capacity to respond to and communicate about public health emergencies. Once your risk communication plan is developed, it will **continue to evolve** based on changing contact information, technology advances, and organizational policies and procedures.

***“The single most important responsibility that can be assigned to someone in your organization is the duty to keep the plan alive.”***

*(CDC's Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication, September 2002)*

The CDC recommends regularly scheduled reviews and updates to ensure the longevity and usefulness of the plan. **The following person has been given responsibility for identifying and implementing needed changes to the Plan on a regular basis:**

<div>[Name]</div> <div>[Title]</div> <div>[Contact Information]</div>
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**6. Plan Distribution List**

When updates to this Plan occur, the following individuals will receive an updated version:

<b>Name</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Address</b>	<b>Phone</b>
1.			
2.			
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